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Applying Rhetorical Genre Studies to a Stand-Alone Online Professional Writing Course



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Abstract: This program profile explains and illustrates a pedagogical application of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) to a one-semester, upper-division online Professional Writing course. We explain our use of a heuristic, which we liken to “night-vision goggles,” that enables students to systematically analyze field data that they gather from a participating worksite. We adapt an RGS methodology developed by Anthony Paré and Graham Smart to create our course heuristic and add a more explicit framework for investigating concepts of genre set, genre system, and activity system. We argue that our course design addresses transfer concerns by helping students develop meta-awareness, or specifically critical genre awareness, that they can then apply to future workplace writing situations.

Introduction

As professors in the Department of English at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA), we imagine that our experience providing Professional Writing instruction to our student body is not unlike that of many colleagues at other institutions. Our English department provides what Patricia Sullivan and James Porter advocated for in the early 1990s: “a space for professional writing as a distinctive field and as a separate-but-equal component within the department of English” (391).^[1] Professional Writing is an “equal” component of our English course offerings insofar as we offer a distinct course dedicated to this topic (the central component of an evolving minor), even if we do not offer a fully developed and specialized Professional Writing *program*. To wit, we currently deliver all of our formal Professional Writing instruction through a single course and do not have the resources to systematically support additional learning opportunities such as a more long-term apprenticeship or internship model, as has been discussed in other Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) pedagogy scholarship (e.g., Blakeslee; Freedman and Adam; Smart and Brown, *Developing*; Winsor). Our “program,” then, is arguably a stand-alone course. Despite this limitation, we are committed to helping our students understand Professional Writing through the lens of RGS. For us, this most fundamentally means following Carolyn Miller’s call to “groun[d] genre in situated rhetorical action” (154).

In designing our current ENGL 313 course plan to more fully embrace RGS theory (a refashioning of the course’s earlier iteration, which we describe below), we consulted literature about the teaching of genre and RGS-inspired pedagogical practices. We found most helpful Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff’s recent survey of pedagogical strategies in *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy*—an accessible resource that we imagine other scholars find instructive when assessing their own course design for teaching genre/genre awareness. Pedagogical approaches that explicitly embrace an RGS philosophy, according to Bawarshi and Reiff, are those that do one or more of the following: attend to transfer, help students achieve critical awareness of genre, enable students to both critique genre and produce alternative generic writing in light of that critique, and develop a sense of genre as contextually situated (189). Additionally, the authors assert that with an RGS pedagogy, students “learn how to recognize genres as rhetorical responses to and reflections of the situations in which they are used” and that “students learn how to use genre analysis to participate and intervene in situations they encounter,” thus demonstrating deep rhetorical awareness (192). In light of these insights, we aim to foster students’ understanding and navigation of the larger systems into which texts fit while minimizing instruction on how to produce discreet texts. We suspect that other teacher-scholars delivering a stand-alone Professional

Writing course might like to use RGS theory to inform their curriculum and better enable transfer but might find such a project difficult. Thus, this “program” profile presents our heuristic-based application of RGS in our stand-alone, online Professional Writing Course: ENGL 313.

We should note that there are three reasons why we find the online format to be fitting for ENGL 313. As instructors, we consider online education to be valuable, pedagogically sound, and increasingly legitimized within our profession considering, for example, the work done by the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction. In relation to this course in particular, the online format enables us to provide individualized attention to students as they conduct course-directed but independently focused field research in professional contexts of their choosing. Finally, in logistical terms, the online format also provides students with additional scheduling flexibility that supports planning and completing the field research portion of the course.

In what follows, we outline our course planning and design, which we hope will provide one model for an RGS-inspired Professional Writing course that could be delivered in an online, face-to-face, or hybrid format. We first introduce ENGL 313 by situating it within the context of our department and university. We then go on to address how we have geared this stand-alone course to meet the needs of a mixed-student population (i.e., English majors, English minors, and majors from other disciplines). To demonstrate how we connect ENGL 313 to RGS, we explain our (1) reliance on the notion that Professional Writing can be understood as a problem-solving activity and (2) the benefit of using a heuristic to develop students’ critical genre awareness. Before detailing the layout of our course, we explain the methodology that is the basis for our heuristic and, in turn, the backbone of the course: a semester-long, field research project. We conclude by describing some limitations of our course design and speculating as to directions for future research.

Institutional and Programmatic Background

In making their case for the emerging field of Professional Writing studies, Sullivan and Porter contend that curriculum design for Professional Writing programs should reflect local conditions defined by student need and resources (410). Concerns about student needs and limited resources are of particular interest to us, given our institutional location. UAA is an open-access public institution and one of three main campuses that make up the University of Alaska State system. The university is comprised of one main campus and four community campuses with a total enrollment of over 20,000 students. Due to limited faculty resources, we are able to offer a Professional Writing minor that requires students to take two courses from a menu of three available upper-division writing options, only one of which explicitly focuses on the study of Professional Writing. Overall we realize that the current iteration of the minor supports a view that “specialized training in writing is not needed as much as sound advanced general writing courses” (Sullivan and Porter 397). Although the curriculum of the Professional Writing minor continues to develop, this portion of our program remains a valuable part of our offerings and one that has garnered positive interest from UAA administration at a time when the value of many minors is being questioned.

As we have looked for ways to improve ENGL 313, what we consider to be the centerpiece course of the minor, we continue to imagine how to make it more responsive to the unique needs of students seeking this specialization. At the same time, we strive to make the course increasingly reflective of conversations related to RGS. Specifically, RGS theory helps us imagine Professional Writing as a means to build process-oriented genre awareness rather than as a means to teach toward product-oriented, static genre forms. Pursuing the former goal results in what we consider to be a fitting and pedagogically sound response to our mixed-student population.

A brief history of the minor provides a backdrop for understanding the emerging desire among the current composition faculty to make clearer to the UAA student body (and departmental stakeholders) the affordances of Professional Writing at our institution. The Professional Writing minor at UAA was first available to students in 2000, although at that time there was no unique and dedicated Professional Writing course on the books. In the summer of 2002, UAA offered a variable-credit upper-division course called *Professional Writing and Editing* (ENGL 313) for the first time, although it did not officially become part of the Professional Writing minor curriculum until the fall of 2004. Taught as a face-to-face course during summer sessions only, ENGL 313 was originally intended to serve the needs of professionals in the community seeking a writing “tune-up.” However, the course did not attract people with degrees seeking continuing education but rather English majors needing an upper-division English course and Social Work majors required to take an upper-division composition course for graduation.

Two things prompted the department to make significant changes to ENGL 313: The aforementioned enrollment

trend continued and Patricia took a year-long sabbatical to study Professional Writing with a focus on theory and pedagogy. Subsequently, the Department of English made four significant changes to ENGL 313: (1) we re-named the course *Professional Writing*, (2) we changed it from variable credit to three credits, (3) we began offering it once a year online during the Fall/Spring academic calendar, and (4) we changed its focus from reviewing standard genre conventions to cultivating students' critical genre awareness in professional contexts. All of these revisions contributed to improving the focus of ENGL 313 to better match the development of the Professional Writing subfield. With these revisions, ENGL 313 became a regular course offering, providing UAA students with Professional Writing instruction of genre awareness by guiding them in examining the technological, cultural, and social aspects of worksites that they choose and observe. To that end, the newly designed course helps students adopt a problem-solving approach to Professional Writing that relies on a heuristic for cultivating critical genre awareness or what Amy Devitt refers to as "rhetorical awareness" about genres that can lead to "deliberate action when using them" ("Teaching" 337).

Our Curriculum Redesign

The cornerstone of the newly designed course is a semester-long project in which students conduct participant/observation at a worksite of their choosing, analyze their findings in light of course readings, and present their findings in order to articulate their own framework for what Professional Writing is in their chosen industry or field. Students are required to select a workplace from the following options: one that depends on a particular type of writing (e.g., proposals) to get its business done; one that needs a particular content expert (e.g., someone with a Fire Science degree); one in a sector (e.g., law) in which the student might like to work; or one in which the student is already employed, but often at a low-ranking position (thus enabling them to investigate writing practices among those at higher-ranking positions). Providing options for selecting a workplace not only enables students to consider how writing figures into a range of professional contexts but also responds to the mixed enrollment of ENGL 313: future Professional Writers and professionals who plan to write for their jobs.

Addressing the needs of this mixed population has been one of our most formidable pedagogical challenges. Currently, most of the students enrolled in the course are in two of three tracks for the English major—the English Education Option and the Rhetoric and Language Option—because this course fulfills an upper-division writing requirement. It also attracts some students from our third option—Literature—as well as students from a variety of majors who are likely using the course to fulfill the 42-credit upper-division requirement for graduation. The course is also a recommended option for some non-English majors, namely Paralegal Studies and Legal Studies, for which there is an upper-division composition course requirement. Finally, it is a recommended option for students pursuing the Professional Writing minor who must take two courses from a list of three (that includes this course) to meet the requirements of the minor. Professional Writing minors, it is important for us to remember each time we prepare to deliver the course, are *not* English majors. Typically, they are affiliated with other majors in other fields such as the arts and sciences, business, social sciences, education, and technical studies. Clearly, the group of students who enroll in the course come with a variety of disciplinary perspectives, concerns, and ideas about writing in the professions.

In shaping ENGL 313, we have had to consider the differing ways that this mixed group of students might deploy writing competencies in a professional setting and how they might anticipate these writing situations. Some English majors, particularly those in the Rhetoric and Language Option, generally want to learn how to write professionally. We sense that some students struggle to articulate exactly what that means, but to us Professional Writing competencies include writing with precision and clarity adopting an institutional perspective while composing genres in response to a variety of rhetorical situations. The Paralegal and Legal Studies majors and the Professional Writing minors want to be hired to work in their respective area of study, for example, and they need to write effectively as an integral part of a larger set of professional responsibilities. As we help students explore what Professional Writing does and might mean, we recognize the various perspectives these students bring to the course and how their identities as writers or perceived identities as non-writers play a significant role in their engagement with the course. For example, students might initially perceive the former group (writing specialists working in collaboration with content-area specialists) as having less of an agential relationship to their writing than the latter group (content-area specialists whose work may involve writing). Our goal, then, is to help students conceptualize and determine ways that various forms of *professional writing in practice* can—and do—simultaneously enable and constrain writers so that they can apply this knowledge to any future Professional Writing scenario they might encounter.

Professional Writing as Problem Solving: Giving Our Students

“Night-Vision Goggles”

We have deepened the RGS orientation of ENGL 313 by developing a heuristic that encourages students to see Professional Writing as a problem-solving activity, borrowing and modifying the notion of technical writing as a “problem-solving activity” (3) developed by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber. Johnson-Eilola and Selber argue that the need for a problem-solving approach stems from the competencies required of “complex” communication situations. These competencies include:

- “rel[ying] heavily on the ability to analyze a situation before responding to it,”
- not being satisfied to “simply fill in templates or follow rigid procedures,”
- having the ability to “constantly move back and forth between analysis and action, checking [. . .] assumptions against reality and adjusting (sometimes drastically) when [one] detect[s] a mismatch,” and
- understanding that “even the act of defining a situation can profoundly affect the situation itself. (4)

This definition aligns with our understanding of Professional Writing being a similarly complex communication type. For example, the authors’ assertion that technical communicators face the challenge of “developing communication artifacts that represent tasks, processes, procedures, and more in a manner that is useful and usable” (3) surely applies to Professional Communication. But whereas Johnson-Eilola and Selber emphasize technical communication’s relationship to technology development and use, we adopt this problem-solving approach by focusing instead on Professional Communication’s relationship to composing with concomitant individual and institutional voices and within genre-dependent activity systems. Overall, the problem-solving approach is one that has been generative for us as teacher-scholars dedicated to bringing an RGS orientation (through an emphasis on, for example, studying processes of typification) to our Professional Writing course.

Further, we have also borrowed Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s primary tool for doing this problem solving: the heuristic. The authors define a heuristic as “a rough framework for approaching specific types of situations” that helps writers solve problems by “providing tentatively structured procedures for understanding and acting in complex situations” (4). A heuristic responds to problems as phenomena that are “subjective,” “open to change, “and “engaged by multiple actors in a social space” (4). While Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* presents a variety of heuristics, for ENGL 313 we have decided to develop a single heuristic to be used throughout the semester, from pre- through post-fieldwork research. Our goal is to engage students in understanding, using, reflecting upon, evaluating, and even revising this heuristic for *doing* Professional Writing in a variety of situations.

Our heuristic enables experiential learning about genre sets, genre systems, activity systems, and the intersubjective way in which these sets and systems take shape. It divides these concepts into three “lenses” of observation and interpretation, an analogy that aligns with our metaphorical depiction of the heuristic as “night-vision goggles.” As we explain to students, we hope that during the course they will cultivate an ability to “see” professional writing contexts and the writing and writers that animate these professional contexts with a vision earlier unavailable to them. (2) Much like the experience of donning night-vision goggles in order to detect what is otherwise invisible in the dark, we encourage students to understand the heuristic as a tool that they will “field test” during our course and that we hope they will use again when they find themselves in a new and unfamiliar (or “dark”) professional context. Our metaphor is not too different from that of Christine Jensen Sundstrom, who describes genre-focused pedagogies as ones that “teach the writer to fish by providing the equipment and knowledge structures for querying the generic writing practices they will encounter later” (n.p.). Although both metaphors suggest how genre knowledge can be a functional tool to deploy when needed, we like to emphasize with ours that ENGL 313 enables students to open up their goggles and to inspect their inner mechanism. As a class, students study the goggles and contemplate how and why they are assembled as they are, hold them up and practice looking at workplaces through the three lenses of the heuristic, and regularly set the goggles aside in order to try to make sense of and situate themselves within the scene that has become visible. As we will describe in greater detail below, we contend that the heuristic heightens an *opportunity* for abstraction, or high-road learning transfer, just as repeated use of night-vision goggles would allow one’s eyes to adapt to low-light vision.

A Theoretical Basis for Our Heuristic

As suggested above, in ENGL 313 we do not primarily direct students to *produce writing in the genres* they might use as professional writers (3) but instead encourage students to *understand and use our course heuristic* as they conduct and later analyze field research in light of course readings and their peers’ experiences. Specifically, we craft this heuristic to align closely with Charles Bazerman’s discussion of genre sets, genre systems, and activity systems as presented in *Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People*

(see pages 318-9 in particular), which we ask students to read at the beginning of the course. In its most succinct form, our heuristic encourages students to:

- See the range and variety of writing work that happens within a particular context in order to recognize the various communication competencies related to a writer's subject position (a potential result of studying a *genre set*).
- Discern the patterns of sets of genres in terms of production, flow, and use in order to identify the practical, functional, and sequential interactions of texts and writers (a potential result of studying a *genre system*).
- Comprehend how individual texts contribute to the overall work accomplished by a system in order to evaluate the system (from the subject position of the writer) and identify opportunities to participate in, intervene in,^[4] and/or alter the system (a potential result of studying an *activity system*).

To aid students in seeing, discerning, and comprehending genre as rhetorical, our heuristic employs a method for studying genres in workplace settings proposed by Anthony Paré and Graham Smart. Paré and Smart draw their definition of genre from workplace writing research and scholarship by Bazerman to assert that genre is a “broad rhetorical strategy enacted within a community in order to regularize writer/reader transactions in ways that allow for the creation of particular knowledge” (146). This research methodology, one that we find particularly beneficial when we cast ENGL 313 students as researchers, “provides a lens through which researchers can examine the influence and acquisition” of typified writing (153). Using this definition as a research tool—as a lens—students can “explore the full range of social action that constitutes an organization's repeated rhetorical strategies, or genres” (153). This research tool enables this exploration by allowing students to articulate the “observable constituent elements of a genre” as well as the “relationship among [those] elements” (146). Paré and Smart encourage researchers to create a “profile of regularities” that they observe across a set of “dimensions”: social roles, textual features, composing processes, and reading practices.

Encouraging ENGL 313 students to adopt a rhetorical stance to genres has been enabled by Paré and Smart's description of the four types of genre regularities listed above. In *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*, Bazerman argues that participating in knowledge-making in a discipline requires acting in a way that is meaningful to the disciplinary community, not just to the individual. Writers solve the rhetorical problems of writing for their community by modeling the work of published writers (8). However, these regularities developed rhetorically, through processes of “[i]nstitutionalization and codification,” which “occurred because repeated choices appear[ed] to be the collective wisdom (or wisdom of a few powerful actors) to be generally and explicitly advisable” (316). Thus, while these regularities provide writing solutions to rhetorical problems, they encompass not only textual features but also activities that are associated with the discovery itself and with the interpretation of the published writing: “Institutionalized patterns of representation not only shape the form of the utterance, but all the activity leading up to, surrounding, and following the utterance” (316). Paré and Smart draw on Bazerman's work and adapt it into a set of “regularities across four dimensions: a set of texts, the composing processes involved in creating those texts, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles performed by writers and readers” (147).

Although these four regularities help to reveal a genre-in-action, in transferring this methodology to the classroom we have modified Paré and Smart's approach in three ways. First, we include their idea of technology of production—part of the “broad range of activities” that make up “composing processes” (150)—but designate this as a *primary* area of investigation in order to help our twenty-first century students recognize how technologies critically influence genres-in-action. Second, we draw from Paré and Smart's brief discussion of initiation into a workplace writing culture to make workplace writing learning processes another discrete component of our heuristic (153).

Our third adaptation of the methodology relates to a more complex concept, what we refer to as the “effects” of the regularities. Our notion of effects is based on Paré and Smart's suggestion that genre regularities constrain and enable readers and writers, an insight that we consider to be so important that we have included it as a defining component of our heuristic. Students uncover effects by asking the kinds of questions that Paré and Smart pose in their essay:

How do [. . .] dimensions of genre enable or prevent ways of seeing and knowing? What kind of thinking or problem-solving does [a] genre facilitate? And how much leeway do individuals have within any one dimension of [a] genre? Can textual features be altered without jeopardy? How far can writers and readers stray from the roles they conventionally perform within a genre before the collective is threatened? (153)

To help students understand the potential implications of effects, we offer the following example, based on

personal experience. A local physician was faced with using a new online documentation system that was designed in such a way that it limited the information that the physician could record about each patient. Further complicating matters, clients did not always see the same physician when visiting the practice. This physician has expressed concern about how the rigidity of the online form potentially prevents others in her practice from seeing and knowing vital client information not allowed by the form. In this scenario, “jeopardy” relates not to those documenting client information so much as it does to the clients whose health and safety is on the line. As this anecdote helps us explain to students, effects has two dimensions. One dimension has to do with the knowledge constrained by the genre; the other has to do with the potential consequences of this limited knowledge.

The Heuristic in Action

Our emphasis on deploying a heuristic to solve problems related to Professional Writing shapes the organization and components of ENGL 313, which are as follows:

Course Goals and Structure

ENGL 313 includes activities that help students accomplish four primary learning goals:

- Describe concepts relevant to critical genre awareness.
- Choose and describe a workplace context and genre regularities of that context.
- Analyze these regularities by determining their effects.
- Apply critical genre awareness concepts to the chosen workplace of study and prepare for further, future application by reflexively situating oneself within the analysis.

The course’s field research emphasis enables students to analyze genre sets within a workplace and conceptualize how these genres align with the workplace’s larger activity system. We consider the ultimate benefit of such awareness to be students’ ability “to evaluate the effectiveness of the total systems and the appropriateness of each of the genred documents in carrying forward that work” because such analysis “could help [students] determine whether any change in any of the documents, distribution, sequence, or flow might improve the total activity system” (Bazerman, “Speech Acts” 326). In short, we want students to use their night-vision goggles to see how genred activity systems in professional settings are simultaneously fixed and potentially flexible and to envision themselves as writers mindfully and shrewdly interposing into said systems.

Toward that critical end, our course design emphasizes reflexive student research and triangulation in the process of collecting data and contemplating its significance. We borrow the notion of reflexivity from Katrina M. Powell and Pamela Takayoshi, who emphasize the way self-reflexive research (as opposed to reflective research) extends beyond “deep or careful thought generally” in order to situate the researcher subjectively within “systematic, methodologically explicit research” (3). A reflexive orientation means that we ask students to repeatedly engage with findings (theirs and their peers’) in order to project future workplace writing situations and imagine themselves as problem-solving, critically aware, and engaged writers. Additionally, our requirement that students work in semester-long peer groups that meet after each phase of field research is an effort to help students triangulate their own observations with those of the peers in regular sharing sessions. In these collaborative sessions, we ask students to critically reflect on their own site-generated data and that of others in the course, thus enabling the classroom to “follow” students to workplaces (Brent 415). Sharing can provide students with opportunities to “learn from each other how [the] activity networks [of their workplaces] shape the genres used within them” (Spinuzzi 304). For example, students gain useful perspectives when considering how workplaces invite a wide range of writer intervention—less from workplaces (like a legal firm) that rely on highly standardized genres and more from workplaces that have fewer models or genre expectations (like a start-up). For example, the last time Patricia taught the class, one student needed help seeing how an apparent lack of uniformity in workplace writing was, in fact, an unconventional convention. Such student exchange is part of the larger move to have students triangulate their fieldwork findings (observation and interview data), theoretical concepts from course readings, and peer feedback. At the end of each phase of field research and collaborative reflection, students write progress reports that document their findings, enabling them to be poised for analysis. The scaffolded structure of the course enables us to monitor the projects and guide learning as needed.

Major Course Activities

Our overarching student learning goals translate into three learning units:

- Part I: Establishing a conceptual base (Weeks 1-5)
- Part II: Collecting data (Weeks 6-10)
- Part III: Analyzing data and reflecting on lessons learned (Weeks 11-15)

Part I: Establishing a Conceptual Base

To set the stage for RGS-inspired learning, students read, discuss, and apply concepts relevant to genre analysis through low-stakes writing assignments. Here we call attention to several especially relevant course readings: Bazerman's *Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People*; excerpts from Anne Beaufort's foundational work, *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*; Devitt's *Intertextuality in Tax Accounting: Generic, Referential, and Functional*; and Paré and Smart's *Observing Genres in Action: Towards a Research Methodology*. We also assign portions of Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V. Street's *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* to help students conceptualize and begin field research.

Asking students to engage with these pivotal yet accessible texts helps them construct a framework for studying Professional Writing from a critical genre awareness approach—one that they begin to articulate through low-stakes, writing-to-learn opportunities. For example, after students read Bazerman's article, we give them questions for response (e.g., "According to Bazerman, what is 'uptake' and why is it important to consider?"). We also ask students to begin to cultivate a sense of critical genre awareness as they move from one text to another (e.g., "Beaufort's discussion of *rhetorical knowledge* emphasizes a writer's strategy and purpose for composing. Describe two ways in which Bazerman's essay suggests how writers do something *other than* compose with purpose and strategy."). Additional writing activities (e.g., having students write to a difficult supervisor by composing from an institutional point of view and reflecting on their rhetorical opportunities, constraints, and choices in this situation) allow students opportunities to imagine intersubjective and complex writing situations and to try on unfamiliar and constrained subject positions. Before moving on to Part II of the course, students submit a brief proposal in which they suggest a possible workplace for study. The proposal allows us to approve students' preferred field sites and to advise them on navigating the rhetorical situation of asking for permission to conduct field research.

Part II: Collecting Data in the Field

Below we describe three rounds of scaffolded, ethnographic research that students conduct after they have completed the first unit of the course and once they have successfully identified a workplace to visit several times over the course of roughly five weeks. We have noticed that the Professional Writing minors typically identify workplaces easily; however, English majors are more likely to require one-on-one sessions to help them to identify the type of workplace they would like to study. This aspect of the course helps to professionalize English majors who, we find, often struggle to visualize themselves as Professional Writers.

Round One: Establishing a Sense of Contextual Breadth

Round One tasks provide what we refer to as "contextual breadth." By way of short interviews with several workplace participants, students gather information about what Devitt identifies as genre sets, or texts that "interact[t]" to "accomplish the work" of a workplace. Devitt argues that investigating genre sets enables "examining [a] community's situations," or its "recurring activities and relationships" ("Intertextuality" 340). One way we ask students to investigate genre sets is through observation of the workspace of the organization to determine the use of this space with an eye toward how the physical environment relates to producing texts. Finally, relying on web and printed materials as well as interviews, students learn about the organization's identity, which can include its goals or mission, its function, its clients, and the services it offers. We encourage students to gather this broad base of information because we want them to return to this data later during their analysis, particularly when they think about the effects of the activity system and their potential subject position within a similar system.

Students conclude Round One by writing Progress Report #1, which describes the workplace: the types of writing required, the material conditions for writing, and the nature of the organization. The purpose of this report is to document this contextual breadth, to identify one key participant to interview further, and to share initial ideas about what professional genre they will study in-depth.

Round Two: Establishing a Sense of Contextual Depth

Round Two tasks provide what we refer to as “contextual depth.” Students conduct an extended (two- to three-hour) visit to the field site, during which they observe the workplace (primarily by shadowing their previously identified workplace participant) and collect texts that they see or hear about during this observation. Here we borrow the idea of collecting texts from the field from Bazerman’s encouragement to do so “over a day, or a week, or a month” (Speech Acts 325), modifying this design to better meet the scope of our course.

While on this extended site visit, students take field notes in order to create a log of all that they see. More specifically, students identify all texts used, produced, and circulated within their observational frame. After they complete the observation, we ask students to use their field notes and the textual artifacts they have collected from the field in order to *track* each text’s exigence, purpose, audience, and sequence of use. This task is similar to the heuristic for ethnographic genre analysis developed by Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi, though ours is based explicitly on the methodology by Paré and Smart described above.

Students conclude Round Two by preparing Progress Report #2, in which they describe their methodology and what they observed. In addition, they discuss what they deduce about exigence, purpose, audience, and sequence of use in relation to the texts that they collect and in light of their field notes, textual analysis, and discussion in their peer groups. The purpose of this report is to help students create and organize a data set from which, we hope, they will later identify a larger “framework which organizes [the professional writers’] work, attention, and accomplishment” (Bazerman, “Speech Acts” 319). We ask students to share this report orally in small groups so that we can guide conversations about differences across workplaces.

Round Three: Establishing a Sense of Genres-in-Action

Round Three tasks contribute to what we refer to as a “genre-in-action profile.” Students interview their workplace participant to ask about five characteristics of genres-in-action: social roles, composing processes, reading practices, technologies of production, and learning processes. These interviews help students determine the regularities of their genre-of-study as described by Paré and Smart (the first four characteristics) and also enable students to ask workplace participants about the processes by which they initially learn about and continue to adapt to writing challenges and expectations in their workplace. While textual features are one of the characteristics students investigate in the field, they analyze these later, in Part III of the course. The information about regularities students gather in the field and their feedback from peers during a post-fieldwork collaborative sharing session becomes the focus of Progress Report #3, in which they describe their methodology and summarize the genre regularities. The purpose of this report is to create a blueprint of the genre-in-action profile in order to “explore the full range of social action that constitutes an organization’s repeated rhetorical strategies, or genres” (Paré and Smart 153).

Part III: Analyzing Data and Reflecting on Lessons Learned

In this last phase of the course, students analyze the data they have collected from the field as well as their reflections on this data in order to compose an end-of-term final report. The topics of the final report include:

- Description of the Workplace as a Context for Writing
- Genre-in-Action Regularities
- Textual Regularities
- Effects of Regularities
- Workplace Participant’s Process of Learning
- Reflections and Realizations

We help students understand these broad topics as follows:

Description of the Workplace as a Context for Writing

This part of the final report asks students to pull from Progress Reports #1 and #2 in order to create an overview of the workplace at a bird’s-eye view that provides an orientation to writing roles, the workspace, and the overall organizational/institutional goals and identity. The overview also describes the genre system in the workplace. In sum, this part of the report provides an introduction to, in the words of Bazerman, “what people are doing and how texts help people do it” (“Speech Acts” 319).

Genre-in-Action Regularities

In this section, students revisit Progress Report #3 to describe the characteristics of genres-in-action in order to later (in the report) articulate and analyze the *expectations* for social roles, composing processes, reading practices, and technologies of production. To determine regularities in *social roles*, student researchers investigate the social dynamics that occur when a document is being produced, which gets at what Paré and Smart refer to as “an organization’s drama of interaction, the interpersonal dynamics that surround and support certain texts” (149). Determining social roles involves finding out about a writer’s relationship to others in an organization and to the audience(s) for the document as well as the writer’s level of authority and role when writing the document. It can include knowledge about expectations for expertise and about the roles and responsibilities of others in the organization. This regularity can be helpful in identifying discrepancies between official and unofficial organization hierarchy and roles, a use that some students in ENGL 313 have found particularly illuminating.

To determine regularities in *composing processes*, student researchers explore the broad range of activities associated with producing a document to better understand why it has been written, who has been involved in the writing process, and the manner in which it is composed. This line of inquiry requires learning about the exigency of the document, the typical timeline given for writing the document, formalized steps in the composing process, processes of information gathering, individual and collaborative activities, levels of review, and technological requirements (Paré and Smart 150). Because Paré and Smart suggest that regularities in composing processes “allow for consistency in the making of knowledge” (151), researchers should also explore *how* these interconnected and predictable processes lead to intended, appropriate, and accumulated knowledge.

And finally, to determine regularities in *reading practices*, student researchers inquire about a document’s audiences, context, and function (151-3). This investigation requires learning who the primary audience is as well as what someone in that type of position and industry or sector typically expects and needs, what their relationship is to the writer and to the workplace, why this person is the audience, and how and when they read and use the information that the document provides. Paré and Smart point out that this also requires learning about the reading practices of others in the workplace who are not the intended audience but who may have a stake in the outcome associated with the document, and so are concerned about whether the primary reader of a document “will take an appropriate stance, ask the right questions, draw the relevant implications, and thus make informed decisions” (152-3). In other words, specialists in the writer’s workplace read the document from their own particular stance in anticipation of the meaning that primary readers will make.

Textual Regularities

For this portion of the report, students study closely a set of the documents they have collected from the field. We purposefully ask students to resist close textual analysis of this type until Part III of the course in an effort to discourage them from focusing on the “easy to notice features [of a text] that signal [them] about the kind of text it is” (Bazerman, *Speech Acts* 322). Having already gathered a wealth of field data, we now encourage students to describe the genre’s “repeated patterns in [. . .] structure, rhetorical moves, and style” (Paré and Smart 147). Again, students compose this portion of the report in order to later articulate and analyze textual expectations of the genre.

To identify regularities in textual features, student researchers consider patterns they identify in a textual artifact—generally speaking, the genre’s content, organization, style, and format. More specifically, they consider repetition of document components (e.g., background information), rhetorical moves (e.g., types of evidence the writer has used, what sort of argument the writer has made, writing from an institutional point of view), style preferences (e.g., degree and nature of detail, sentence and paragraph length, use of active and passive voice, nominalizations), and formatting conventions (e.g., use of headings or charts). As Paré and Smart point out, “[r]epeated patterns in the structure, rhetorical moves, and styles of texts are the most readily observable aspects of the genre” (147).

Effects of Regularities

Students use this portion of the final report to interpret how genre-in-action regularities and textual regularities help or hinder, constrain or enable the writer within the activity system that they have begun to identify. We encourage students to base these interpretations on their first-hand observations, the information shared by their workplace participant, and the conclusions they have drawn from their collaborative sharing sessions with peers. We ask that this interpretation be based on the two dimensions of effects described above.

Workplace Participant's Process of Learning

This section of the final report asks students to summarize the workplace participant's process of learning within their activity system. As stated above, students have asked the participant to reflect upon their process of initiation into the writing culture of the workplace, the amount of time they had to adapt to and acclimate to that culture, and their specific strategies for problem solving when faced with writing challenges (such as identifying what to do when asked to write in an unfamiliar genre for the first time). We ask students to consider all of the feedback they receive in this portion of the interview in order to make some general observations about the participant's initial and continual processes of learning.

Reflections and Realizations

The report culminates with the students' discussion of genre and genres in workplace contexts/systems as metacognitive concepts. If the previous five sections of this report allow students to describe and reflect *what* they have seen with their night-vision goggles, this last section prompts them to articulate *how* the goggles work—and how they might use them in a future workplace writing context and/or how they might use them to “re-see” a current workplace. Specifically, we ask students to answer questions about how they would imagine themselves functioning effectively as a writer in the workplace that they have studied, how the organization should consider changing the texts in use or the ways in which the texts are used, and to speculate as to what effect such changes would have on the overall system of the workplace.

Once they conclude the semester-long project, we encourage students to thank workplace participants and offer to make their findings available to them, once again guiding them through a new professional rhetorical situation.

Aligning Our Heuristic with the Idea of Transfer

We believe that our heuristic also attends to concerns about transfer in Professional Writing studies voiced by Doug Brent because it potentially provides a platform for *further* learning—that is, for transfer construed as “*prior learning that has been transformed*” (410). Brent points out that the concern about transfer is particularly troubling for those who teach technical and professional writing: “If there is a doubt about whether students can transfer their rhetorical knowledge and skill to neighboring academic disciplines [. . .] there is even more doubt about whether they can do so to the professional workplace” (397). Even though he argues that “transfer theory tells us that transfer is fraught, elusive, difficult to measure, and by no means automatic,” Brent contends that transfer theory “assures us that it happens, and indeed happens often” if we rely on an expanded notion of the term (409). It is with this assurance in mind that we have made our heuristic the centerpiece of ENGL 313.

Although we have not yet tracked “evidence” of transfer or transformed learning in this course, we have thought carefully about our design based on course readings about writing in the workplace and student feedback from prior semesters that suggests that the course is unique in its practical application. Our heuristic does not focus on prior knowledge that students bring to class nearly as much as it anticipates the writing situations that students will face in the future. According to Beaufort, who conducted an ethnography of four writers composing for a non-profit,

beyond gaining general analytical thinking skills and some awareness of rhetorical situations, the informants [in her study] saw little connection between the school and workplace writing situations, nor did they seem to have a ready language for making extensive comparisons of the two contexts for composing. (183)

Similarly, our experience teaching the course has shown us that students respond to the nature of their new Professional Writing knowledge by indicating that they too found a limited connection between it and what they had learned in college writing courses. These observations—Beaufort's and our own—bring to mind the concept of *vujà dé*, coined by the late comedian George Carlin: “The strange feeling that none of this has ever happened before.”^[5] We call students' attention to the common experience of workplaces being unfamiliar sites of writing for many college students. We do, however, acknowledge that workplace writing might not be entirely new and that students may bring some relevant knowledge to such writing situations. For example, some students choose a workplace where they are currently employed and may have knowledge that students new to that workplace would not have. In addition, Professional Writing minors may bring disciplinary knowledge (such as expertise in legal studies) to the project. And finally, all students draw from useful rhetorical knowledge gleaned from prior college writing courses. We find, however, that in all cases this knowledge, however valuable, is cursory in relation to what the night-vision goggles can and do reveal—hence our encouragement for students to take a *vujà dé*

approach to gaining critical genre awareness through our course.

Night-vision goggles provide a framework for approaching a *future* workplace because they give students an apparatus to solve the problem of understanding the dynamics of a workplace and knowing how to act within an activity system—how to *do* professional writing. *vujà dé*, then, might suggest that transfer is limited with regard to our Professional Writing students, but that would only be the case if transfer exclusively referred to prior knowledge students brought to the first class session instead of how learning in the class transfers forward. We rely on Bawarshi and Reiff's notion of transfer, in which they suggest that scholars argue for the value of pursuing transfer through meta-cognition (191). For us, a meta-cognition goal means helping students develop meta-awareness or what we refer to above as critical genre awareness. Like Bawarshi and Reiff, we turn to David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's notion of "forward-reaching, high road transfer" or the type of learning in which "one learns something and abstracts it in preparation for applications elsewhere" (26). In ENGL 313, "night-vision goggles" are meant to enable such high-road transfer. We can attest to claims by students that their experience with this course (the heuristic) provides them with more abstract—what we would call rhetorical—knowledge about writing than they might have originally anticipated. We consider such pleasant surprises by these students related to Elizabeth Wardle's notion of "metacognition in the form of rhetorical awareness," which she identifies as, to use the words of Brent, "one of the most transferable, or transformable, contributions of prior learning" (411).

Explaining Limitations and Considerations

We find value in requiring ethnographic fieldwork of our students because, as Bazerman points out, it prevents us from simply "identifying and analyzing genres by making up plausible reasons for easily spotted features" (Speech Acts 323), and it helps student researchers have a context for "see[ing] the full range of implicit practice" within a workplace system (325). Although we find our approach useful, we have identified several limitations in our course design—concerns we feel are important to note but that, in our determination, do not significantly hinder student learning outcomes.

One limitation relates to the ideal scope for ethnographic inquiry that Bazerman recommends: "If the genres and work are organized within a limited and coherent cycle, then you can use that cycle to organize and limit your collecting (Speech Acts 327). In a one-semester course, we do not think it is reasonable to expect students to capture a full "cycle" in their workplace, particularly because such cycles would vary in each workplace being visited. Nevertheless, our data-collection guidance is, we feel, robust.

A second limitation relates to the organizational structure of the workplace and the accessibility of information during the ethnographic portion of the students' research. Some workplaces are local affiliates of a large corporation or institutional headquarters. For example, a local Apple store operates under the supervision of a distant corporate headquarters that imposes guidelines on the workplace. While these guidelines might be accessible at the local worksite, they might only be available through second-hand information provided by on-site management. In other words, some crucial genre-in-action information might remain out of view or not quite in focus to the students. Although we think it appropriate to call attention to this facet of students' experiences in the field, we consider this to be simultaneously a limitation and an opportunity to assess a realistic workplace arrangement that surely influences an activity system and the writing that takes place within that system.

As described above, we deliver ENGL 313 fully online, which we find to have specific advantages and disadvantages. Because an online course can sometimes *seem* more like an individual than a group learning environment, the individual research component of the course is well-suited for online instruction. We as instructors can give asynchronous, individual feedback to students conducting fieldwork at varying locations while still providing global feedback to the class (typically through a weekly address). The synchronous chat sessions described above are our effort to help students exchange ideas in small learning communities, thus deepening their ability to learn alongside and from one another. Some students, we realize, chafe at the idea of collaborating in an online course because of their perception of online learning being self-paced and individual. Information in the course syllabus and introductory materials explain the collaborative portion of the course and address related expectations (e.g., the need to occasionally schedule a meeting with peers; software and hardware requirements; the usefulness of finding a good location on or off campus in which to connect remotely, etc.). We present multiple options for how students might connect (via video chat, discussion board, email, etc.) so that access issues do not prevent any student from participating in this portion of the course.

Finally, our experience with helping students work with field data in order to create a final report has taught us that we, as instructors, need to take a proactive and responsive role in helping students use their heuristic goggles effectively. Specifically, we help navigate student researchers as they *try to apply* the regularities of the

methodology systematically but help them to *be responsive* to what they are finding in the field and to subsequently *adjust the application of the heuristic*. For example, examining the regularities in the reading process may be limited, such as in the case of a student working in a local engineering firm who is writing proposals in response to an RFP. In this instance, the student must rely on the workplace participant's speculation about how the genre will be read and therefore the student's analysis will likely emphasize other regularities that are more directly observable. Although this situation might appear to result in "uneven" data, the instructor can help students realize that such unevenness does not invalidate the results. Instead, we liken this flexibility in applying a standardized methodology to the flexibility that rhetorical scholars employ when using Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad.

Looking Toward Future Goals

We identify three reasons why our heuristic-focused, problem-solving approach is beneficial for a stand-alone online Professional Writing course. First, this course design enables us to cultivate meta-awareness among the varied student population of the course, which in practical terms means that the course can accommodate a wide range of students with diverse career goals. Second, it allows us to lead students toward mastery of an interpretive frame, which has the potential to be used flexibly in their own (work) lives and within the wildly varying and idiosyncratic professional contexts that they will likely encounter. And third—and perhaps most importantly in light of the insights of Miller and later RGS scholars—the heuristic approach encourages students to grapple with intersubjectivity through field interactions and guided reflexivity, considering what intersubjective awareness might look like when writing in a professional setting. As Bazerman explains, understanding genres as writing types that "work in the systems and circumstances they were designed for" helps writers "fulfill the needs of the situation in ways that are understood and speak to the expectations of others." This competency, in turn, can help writers "diagnose and redesign communicative activity systems" to omit redundancy, to correct misleading information, to be aware of instances when documents need to be created or modified, to assess the need for innovative writing or alternative writing goals, etc. (Speech Acts 311). In sum, by helping students understand and use their night-vision goggles, we hope that they will not only see genres and genre systems within a professional setting but also envision ways to participate within a larger activity system that may otherwise seem predetermined.

This profile has given us the opportunity to share our course design with an audience outside our university. We consider a useful next step to be conducting a longitudinal study that would assess to what extent our heuristic becomes a platform for transfer. Miller concludes *Genre as Social Action* by asserting that the "perspective on genres" she proposes "has implications not only for criticism and theory, but also for rhetorical education" (165). We find her insight about the value of genre awareness—awareness that is, in essence, social and intersubjective—to be an inspiration for our pedagogy: "We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potentials for failures and success in acting together" (Miller 165).

Notes

1. Writing in 2007, Thomas Kent points out that even though Sullivan and Porter published their article in 1993, "[it] remains timely in disciplinary and institutional terms" (12). ([Return to text.](#))
2. We are suggesting through our night vision goggles metaphor that students will have a deeper *understanding* of Professional Writing as an intersubjective and contextualized activity; that is, by "see" we mean "understand." We recognize the able-bodied assumptions potentially inherent in our conceit, so we make explicit to students that we are sensitive to the non-universality of what we consider to be an otherwise useful metaphor. ([Return to text.](#))
3. We do, however, provide a basic overview of some ubiquitous Professional Writing forms, such as the business memo. ([Return to text.](#))
4. We borrow this notion of intervention and participation from Bawarshi and Reiff, who describe it in *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (192). ([Return to text.](#))
5. We attribute this connection to Clancy Ratliff's WPA-L inquiry about the role of *vujà Dé* in transfer. Ratliff, Clancy. Knowledge Transfer and 'vujà Dé.' *Writing Program Administration Listserv*. 10 Dec. 2013, Web. 10 Dec. 2013. ([Return to text.](#))

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